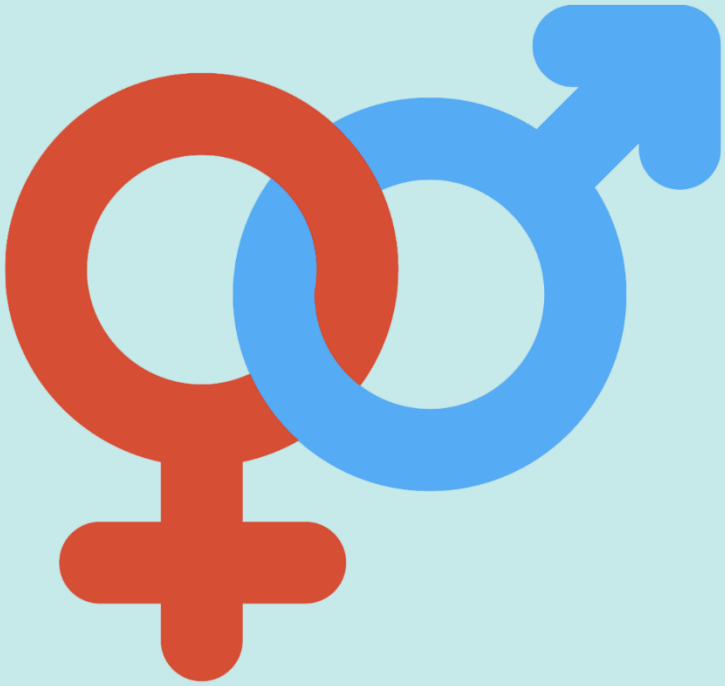
Balkan Civil Society
Development Network

THE MISSING LENS

Rethinking the Enabling Environment for Gender Equality and Civil Society in the Western Balkans

2025



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The Missing Lens: Rethinking the Enabling Environment for Gender Equality and Civil Society in the Western Balkans 2025

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List of Abbreviations

BCSDN	Balkan Civil Society Development Network
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EU	European Union
EU4GE	EU for Gender Equality
EU GAP	EU Gender Action Plan
HRD	Human Rights Defender
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, and other gender and sexual identities
MM	Monitoring Matrix
SLAPP	Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation
TACSO	Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organizations
USD	United States Dollar
UN	United Nations
WB	Western Balkans
WHRD	Woman Human Rights Defender

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Their collective commitment and diverse perspectives have been essential in advancing a nuanced understanding of the enabling environment for gender-focused civil society organizations across the region. We are deeply grateful for their unwavering support and expertise, which have strengthened the quality and impact of this work.

Executive Summary

This report investigates the enabling environment for civil society organizations (CSOs) working on gender equality, women's rights, feminist activism, and LGBTIQ+ issues across the Western Balkans in 2025. Despite formal legal guarantees for association, assembly, and expression, organizations operating in these fields face distinct structural, political, and societal challenges that diverge significantly from those encountered by the broader civil society sector.

The **operational landscape** for feminist and LGBTIQ+ organizations is marked by limited access to resources, bureaucratic obstacles, and a climate of increasing anti-gender narratives. These groups frequently encounter informal gatekeeping, excessive documentation demands, and administrative delays, undermining their capacity to operate effectively and sustainably. While **legal rights formally protect freedoms of assembly and expression, implementation remains inconsistent**, with gender-focused demonstrations and advocacy efforts often met with opposition from conservative and nationalist groups in both physical and digital spaces. Online harassment, disinformation campaigns, and smear tactics have become normalized, posing significant risks for activists and organizations.

State–CSO cooperation is institutionalized through frameworks such as working groups, consultative bodies, and thematic councils. However, these mechanisms often result in **symbolic rather than substantive engagement**, characterized by irregular processes and limited incorporation of CSO input. Municipal-level cooperation varies widely, with positive examples remaining localized and dependent on individual political will. The majority of gender-focused CSOs remain reliant on international donor funding, constraining long-term sustainability and reinforcing a pattern in which cooperation with the state is episodic, project-based, and rarely transformative.

The enabling environment is further shaped by **entrenched patriarchal power structures and the rapid expansion of coordinated anti-gender mobilization**. What initially emerged as sporadic backlash has evolved into highly organized transnational movements drawing on religious, nationalist, and conservative networks. These actors deploy a wide range of tactics, including smear campaigns, disinformation, sexualized harassment, and strategic lawsuits, to delegitimize and silence feminist and LGBTIQ+ groups. The online vilification, physical intimidation and personalization of attacks has turned civic participation of these actors into a high-risk activity across the region.

This patriarchal configuration of power is reflected not only in state institutions and public discourse but also in the **distribution of public resources, the selectivity of institutional cooperation, and the climate of impunity** surrounding threats and violence. Institutions often reproduce and reinforce gender inequalities, with decision-making processes dominated by men and traditional gender roles. Activists face systemic hostility not just for their messaging but for their very presence in public life, which challenges established gender hierarchies. These dynamics have contributed to fragmentation within feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements, weakening collective power and reducing visibility in policymaking arenas.

Taken together, the findings reveal a central **tension between formal guarantees and real-world practice**. While gender equality is embedded in policy frameworks and EU accession agendas, implementation remains hindered by patriarchal norms, administrative arbitrariness, and political resistance. The normalization of anti-gender rhetoric and the inconsistent enforcement of fundamental rights perpetuate a civic space that is conditional, uneven, and often hostile for gender-focused organizations. This dynamic perpetuates cycles of exclusion, marginalization, and vulnerability, making it increasingly difficult for gender CSOs to assert their autonomy and influence in shaping inclusive and equitable societies.

A truly enabling environment **requires addressing the intersecting political, financial, and cultural barriers** that restrict the autonomy and influence of gender CSOs. A gender-responsive civic space is not an isolated objective but a precondition for democratic resilience, accountability, and inclusive social transformation. Interventions should prioritize dismantling deeply rooted patriarchal norms, ensuring transparent and objective oversight, and integrating gender perspectives across all policy sectors and EU accession-related reforms. Sustainable funding, predictable institutional cooperation, and strengthened protection mechanisms are essential to support a resilient, independent, and effective gender equality movement across the Western Balkans.

Introduction

The Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) bi-annually publishes a thematic Research in Focus report to complement the annual Monitoring Matrix (MM) Report on the Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. Each Research in Focus is designed to provide an in-depth examination of a priority topic identified based on recent monitoring findings, emerging trends, and developments across the region. These reports aim to assess the current state of play at the national level, detect cross-cutting patterns regionally, and support civil society actors with evidence-based strategies to navigate complex challenges related to the thematic focus.

For 2025, BCSDN's Research in Focus concentrates on the enabling environment for civil society organizations (CSOs) operating in the fields of gender equality, women's rights, reproductive health, LGBTIQ+ rights, and evolving gender roles. This thematic choice responds to a critical need to deepen understanding of the unique conditions affecting these organizations, whose struggles and operational realities often remain obscured within sector-wide civic space analyses.

Longitudinal research and rigorous monitoring of civic spaces and civil society development in the Western Balkans have hinted on more than one occasion that organizations working on gender-related issues experience markedly different and more severe challenges compared to the broader CSO sector.[1] Women activists and CSO leaders, in particular, face intensified gender-based threats and forms of repression. Women journalists and media workers covering gender and rights topics are disproportionately targeted by harassment, both online and offline.

The need for adapting existing monitoring tools to better identify and capture the nuanced and intersectional challenges faced by gender-focused organizations is increasingly evident. Current tools often apply uniform indicators that fail to reflect the complex realities these organizations navigate, underscoring a fundamental inadequacy in monitoring frameworks.

The 2025 Research in Focus thus builds upon and critically complements the Monitoring Matrix methodology by integrating a gender-sensitive lens to reveal corrosive structural, political, and informal dynamics uniquely influencing the enabling environment of gender

[1] Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. (2023, November). Women's Rights in Western Balkans: Women in politics, gender-based violence and security for women human rights defenders in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia 2023. Retrieved October 22, 2025, from https://womensrightscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-Womens-Rights-in-Western-Balkans-2023-1-1.pdf

CSOs. It aims to detect specific forms of marginalization, such as discursive delegitimization, stigmatization, co-optation, and backlash, and to identify concrete strategies for collective advocacy and institutional reform.

In recent years, the enabling environment for human-rights-based organizations working in the Western Balkans has been profoundly shaped by the dual forces of democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarian tendencies in several countries of the region[2]. This shift has brought with it an intensification of exclusionary politics, wherein misogyny, xenophobia, and transphobia have become increasingly prominent within political discourse and public sentiment. These developments have fueled widespread attempts, both deliberate and socially embedded, to roll back hard-won rights under the banner of "traditional values." As a result, the protections and opportunities for meaningful participation of women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and advocates of gender equality have been steadily eroded, sparking a potent backlash that cuts across institutional and grassroots levels alike.

This research undertakes more than a technical assessment of regulatory frameworks or funding landscapes; it probes the deeply entrenched social and political currents that shape the actual conditions under which gender CSOs and activists operate. By foregrounding the lived realities of marginalization, co-optation, and backlash, this work challenges prevailing assumptions about civic space as a uniform arena of rights and freedoms. The findings call for a reframing of the enabling environment, not as a static checklist of legal guarantees but as a dynamic and contested field where power relations, cultural norms, and institutional practices intersect to hinder or facilitate genuine democratic participation. In illuminating these complexities, the 2025 Research in Focus asserts the indispensable role of autonomous, resilient gender equality movements as vital catalysts for democratic deepening and social transformation. Addressing their unique challenges is therefore not only a matter of advancing human rights but a core imperative for safeguarding and revitalizing democracy in the Western Balkans.

[2] BCSDN (2025). Monitoring Matrix on the Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development: Regional Report: Western Balkans and Turkey 2024. Retrieved November 10, 2025 from: https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/63-3-MM-Regional-Report-WBT-2024-FINAL.pdf

Methodology Approach

The methodology for this Research in Focus builds directly upon the established Monitoring Matrix for Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, enriching it with an integrated gender perspective to better capture the specific realities faced by gender-focused CSOs. To provide an accurate and current picture of the enabling environment, additional data points and inputs have been incorporated into the existing Monitoring Matrix toolkit[3], ensuring that the gender dimension is structurally embedded in long-term monitoring efforts. The research combines comprehensive reviews of existing reports, databases, and analyses produced by key national and regional stakeholders with specifically developed questionnaires designed for experts and civil society representatives. These tools reflect and cover all three areas of the Monitoring Matrix methodology: fundamental rights, financial viability, and state-CSO cooperation.

All stages of the research were subject to expert consultations to ensure both methodological robustness and sample validity. National-level data collection was carried out by BCSDN members in close cooperation with local stakeholders who, during 27 expert interviews and 12 focus groups, provided contextualized insights rooted in national realities. The regional report synthesizes findings from all six Western Balkans countries, enabling cross-cutting analyses and identifying shared patterns and challenges. This methodology ensures a nuanced and evidence-based understanding of the evolving enabling environment for gender CSOs, thus supporting the development of strategic and actionable recommendations for advocacy and institutional reform across the region.

[3] Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN). Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development Tool-Kit 2.0. Retrieved October 24, 2025, from https://balkancsd.net/bcsdn-monitoring-matrix-on-enabling-environment-for-civil-society-development-tool-kit-2-0-now-available/

Regional Context

The six Western Balkan countries (WB6), comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, feature a complex environment for CSOs engaged in advancing gender equality and women's rights. While the countries collectively maintain legal and constitutional frameworks that generally guarantee fundamental freedoms such as association, expression, and peaceful assembly, the practical enforcement of these rights, as well as the protection of gender-focused advocacy, remains uneven and subject to various political, institutional, and societal constraints that narrow civic space and complicate efforts toward gender justice.

National legislation within the region has incorporated gender equality provisions, including electoral gender quotas typically ranging from 30 to 40 percent representation on candidate lists, anti-discrimination laws, violence prevention statutes, and gender equality strategies aligned with European Union (EU) accession criteria and international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). However, the **enforcement and implementation of these frameworks vary considerably**. For example, Bosnia and Herzegovina's intricate political system allows divergent legal realities, as observed in Republika Srpska where anti-gender legislative measures have been enacted – most notably the exclusion of "gender identity" from the Criminal Code and refusal to criminalize femicide as a distinct offense. Serbia faces similar enforcement challenges, with limited institutional support hampering the effective application of gender equality provisions. Post-election legislative gridlock in Kosovo further restricts legislative progress, illustrating regional disparities that impede gender advocacy. Interaction between state institutions and gender-focused CSOs is overwhelmingly characterized by sporadic, superficial consultation lacking substantive decision-making power, further restricting meaningful civil society participation.

The **Enlargement Progress Reports for the Western Balkans from 2023 to 2025**[4] reflect a gradual yet uneven integration of gender equality across all WB6 countries within the justice, fundamental rights, and social policy frameworks. Each country report includes specific references to gender mainstreaming efforts and highlights key persistent challenges. Serbia stands out with multiple official recommendations addressing enactment delays of the Law on Gender Equality, its constitutional scrutiny, and gaps in anti-discrimination enforcement. Albania shows progress in electoral gender quotas but struggles with rising anti-gender movements and incomplete implementation of

[4] Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. (2025). EU Enlargement Package 2025: Input for the Western Balkans. Retrieved October 24, 2025, from https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-EU-enlargement-package-2025-Western-Balkans.pdf

protections against gender-based violence, as well as legal recognition of LGBTQI+ rights. Bosnia and Herzegovina's report underscores institutional weaknesses in rights protection, particularly concerning femicide, domestic violence, and inadequate victim support, compounded by political resistance to full alignment with EU norms. Kosovo's reports focus on the stalled legalization of same-sex civil unions and needed improvements in gender budgeting and victim protection services. Montenegro and North Macedonia present more limited recommendations but highlight ongoing gaps in judiciary reforms and women's participation in decision-making. Across the region, gender equality is explicitly framed as a structural component of rule of law consolidation, with official recommendations emphasizing enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, harmonization with the Istanbul Convention, enhanced gender-sensitive judiciary training, and more inclusive political participation. Despite these visible commitments, the reports point to significant obstacles from societal norms, funding shortfalls, and shrinking civic space for women's rights organizations, marking gender equality as a critical area requiring intensified political will and systematic follow-up in the EU accession process.

The current state of gender equality in the Western Balkans, as reflected in the Rule of Law reports, directly resonates with the transformative and intersectional principles outlined in the **EU's Gender Action Plan III (**GAP III)[5]. While WB6 countries have made legislative and strategic commitments to gender equality, the Rule of Law reports highlight significant implementation gaps caused by socio-cultural barriers, political resistance, and underfunded institutional frameworks. GAP III's emphasis on mainstreaming gender perspectives across justice, security, employment, and social policies is mirrored in the reports' recommendations to enforce anti-discrimination laws, combat gender-based violence, and enhance women's political participation. Both frameworks stress the critical role of civil society, especially women's rights organizations, and call for sustainable financing and protection against backlash, including the rise of anti-gender movements in the region.

Moreover, GAP III's targeted focus on the intersecting discrimination faced by marginalized groups such as LGBTQI+ individuals, ethnic minorities, and women with disabilities is reflected in the regional challenges documented in the Rule of Law assessments. The EU plan's call to engage men and boys as allies and to invest in youth as agents of change aligns with regional social attitude initiatives described in the reports. Together, these documents form a coherent narrative: the Western Balkans' gender equality progress is framed as both a vital element and a litmus test of democratic

[5] European External Action Service (EEAS). (2020). Gender Action Plan III: towards a gender-equal world. Retrieved October 24, 2025, from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/gender-action-plan-iii-towards-gender-equal-world_en

governance and rule of law consolidation, necessitating political will, multisectoral action, and community-driven transformation to achieve the EU's vision of a gender-equal world.

Exacerbating these difficulties has been the **emergence and consolidation of anti-gender movements** across the Western Balkans[6], which have gained coherence and financial resources in recent years. These movements are supported by transnational funding networks that have significantly increased their contributions, rising from approximately USD 22.2 million in 2009 to USD 96 million by 2018 within Europe. Countries such as Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and Poland serve as principal hubs for these financial streams.[7] Within the Balkans, anti-gender forces actively advance conservative social agendas framed as preserving "traditional values" and protecting national identities. Their strategies include coordinated disinformation campaigns, delegitimization of gender equality advocates by accusing them of foreign influence or undermining family structures and mobilizing religious and political constituencies to resist gender-related legislation and public awareness initiatives. These actors often collaborate with political entities and media outlets to amplify conservative backlash, which also manifests at the grassroots through social stigmatization and community resistance.

An additional factor deeply entrenched in perpetuating gender inequality is the **unequal distribution of unpaid labor**, specifically care work, which is predominantly performed by women. Women across the Western Balkans engage in substantially more unpaid domestic and caregiving activities than men, often limiting their ability to participate fully in formal employment, political processes, and social protection systems. Informal employment, characterized by precarity, low productivity, and exclusion from labor legislation, represents a significant portion of regional economies, disproportionately affecting women. Country-specific data: women in Serbia spend on average 2.3 times more hours on unpaid work compared to men, while in Kosovo[8], women spend 6.2 hours and men spend 3.5 hours per day on unpaid care work. In Albania[9], women are left carrying the lion's share of domestic duties, with 80% of unpaid care work performed by women, which is considered significant. In North Macedonia[10], the percentage of women who

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[6] German Marshall Fund of the United States. (2025, June 24). The Anti-Gender Movement as a Threat to Democracy in the Western Balkans. Retrieved from https://www.gmfus.org/news/anti-gender-movement-threat-democracy-western-balkans

[7] European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights. (2021, June 15). Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality & Reproductive Health in Europe. Retrieved from https://www.epfweb.org/node/837

[8] Institute for Social Policy Musine Kokalari. (2022). Who Cares? Unpaid Care Work in Kosovo. Retrieved from https://musineinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/07-Who-Cares-ENG08.pdf.

[9] Euractiv. (n.d.). Albania grapples with gender equality at home, work, politics. Retrieved from https://www.euractiv.com/news/albania-grapples-with-gender-equality-at-home-work-politics/.

[10] Global Voices. (2025, April 30). Gains and gaps in gender equality in North Macedonia. Retrieved from https://globalvoices.org/2025/04/30/gains-and-gaps-in-gender-equality-in-north-macedonia/.

perform unpaid care work remains high, with persistent gaps in formal employment and ongoing challenges related to informal sector participation. Consistent and comprehensive data collection on unpaid labor across the region is lacking, impairing the formulation of effective policies addressing care infrastructure and social protection. Consequently, public services and measures promoting shared domestic responsibilities remain inadequate, reinforcing deep-rooted patriarchal social norms.

Women journalists operating in the Western Balkans confront ongoing threats, harassment, and violence that intersect with **broader patterns of gender discrimination in the media sector**. Between 2020 and 2025, an estimated quarter of recorded attacks on media professionals in countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro targeted women journalists[11]. The incidence of attacks in Montenegro increased from 35.3 percent in 2020 to over 52 percent by 2024, while Albania experienced a similar rise. These attacks manifest as verbal abuse, sexist insults, defamation, physical violence, and digital harassment including doxxing and dissemination of fabricated content. The increasing use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation[12] (SLAPPs) in countries like Serbia further intimidates investigative journalists and media organizations by imposing financial burdens and legal challenges. These suits are often initiated by officials or individuals with political connections, thereby curtailing media freedom and fostering self-censorship. Judicial systems across the region frequently fail to investigate and sanction perpetrators effectively, leading to prolonged impunity. Despite these adversities, many women journalists, including notable figures such as Jelena Jovanovic in Montenegro, Natasa Miljanovic-Zubac in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Ola Xama in Albania, persist in their professional pursuits, highlighting critical vulnerabilities within state protection mechanisms.

While structural and systemic obstacles predominate, **localized progress** is evident in certain municipalities and regions. For example, Brčko District and Tuzla in Bosnia and Herzegovina have witnessed collaborative efforts between gender-focused CSOs and local authorities, resulting in gender action plans, tailored training for service providers, and more inclusive legislative consultation processes. These examples demonstrate the potential for incremental institutional reforms even in challenging political contexts. Furthermore, regional and international actors, including the European Union, UN Women, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and organizations such as Kvinna till

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[11] Balcanicaucaso. (2025). "They failed to silence us": the harsh reality of investigative female journalists in the Balkans. Retrieved October 24, 2025, from https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/They-failed-to-silence-us-the-harsh-reality-of-investigative-female-journalists-in-the-Balkans-238020

[12] Balkan Civil Society Development Network. (2024). From Silence to Strength: A regional response to SLAPPs in the Western Balkans. Skopje. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/55-4-BCSDN-Regional-SLAPP-Research-1-1.pdf

Kvinna[13] , have elevated support activities through regional programs like EU for Gender Equality (EU4GE)[14]. These programs focus on women's economic empowerment, prevention of gender-based violence, and promotion of gender-responsive governance. Operating within the frameworks of the Sustainable Development Goals and EU accession processes, such initiatives provide essential technical and financial resources aiming to strengthen civil society capacity and policy influence in the realm of gender equality.

Overall, gender equality in the Western Balkans is supported by formal legislative frameworks but faces considerable implementation challenges. Conservative political currents, fluctuating funding landscapes, entrenched patriarchal social norms, and threats targeting journalists and activists collectively hinder progress. Achieving substantive gender justice requires sustained multi-level cooperation, robust institutional accountability, and enhanced capacity-building for civil society across the region.

[13] Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. (2025). From knowledge to action: Advancing gender equality in the Western Balkans. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/2025/06/26/from-knowledge-to-action-advancing-gender-equality-in-the-western-balkans/

[14] UN Women (2025) Press release: The European Union, UNDP, and UN Women embark on a new journey to empower women and end violence in the Western Balkans. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from: https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/press-release/2025/06/press-release-the-european-union-undp-and-un-women-embark-on-a-new-journey-to-empower-women-and-end-violence-in-the-western-balkans

Gender Perspectives Back-to-Back with the Monitoring Matrix for Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development: Key Research Findings

I. Basic Legal Guarantees of Freedoms

In the six Western Balkan countries (WB6) the **formal legal frameworks** universally enshrine the fundamental freedoms necessary for CSOs dedicated to gender equality and women's rights. All countries incorporate constitutional guarantees of freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, and have laws governing the registration and operation of non-governmental organizations. These laws are broadly harmonized with international human rights conventions such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, reflecting commitments embedded within the European integration processes.

Civil society legislation typically provides an open framework allowing the registration and activities of organizations working on gender, sexuality, reproductive rights, and LGBTIQ+ issues without explicit ideological or thematic restrictions. For example, in North Macedonia, the Law on Associations and Foundations ensures ideological neutrality and facilitates voluntary registration by both domestic and foreign actors, safeguarding the legal right to operate on sensitive issues. Similar provisions exist in Serbia, Kosovo, and Albania, demonstrating a normative alignment supportive of gender-focused civil society activities.

Nevertheless, despite these formal protections, the **operational landscape is fraught with significant challenges**. Gender equality CSOs frequently face bureaucratic hurdles manifesting as protracted registration delays, excessive documentation demands, and inconsistent application of regulatory requirements. In Serbia, feminist and LGBTIQ+ organizations report administrative procedures that can function as informal gatekeeping. In Kosovo, delays tend to reflect broader bureaucratic inefficiencies across public administration, though these still might affect the work of gender-focused organizations.

The collective experience across the region also highlights troubling discrepancies in the protection and facilitation of freedoms of **peaceful assembly and expression**. While protests and advocacy events are legally permitted, gender-focused demonstrations, marches, and public awareness campaigns often meet vociferous opposition from conservative religious and nationalist groups. This opposition manifests through verbal abuse, intimidation, and occasionally physical violence, as seen during pride marches in

North Macedonia and women's rights protests in Serbia. Law enforcement responses vary widely, from proactive protection to passive or sluggish interventions, leaving activists vulnerable and fostering a climate where hostility may escalate with impunity.

*LBGTQI+ activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, organizers of the **Pride March in Banja Luka**, Republika Srpska, were violently attacked by a group of hooligans, in what has been classified as a hate crime. The attack came amid heightened tensions fueled by inflammatory rhetoric from top political leaders, including Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska, and Drasko Stanivukovic, Mayor of Banja Luka, who publicly opposed the Pride event and called for its cancellation. Following the attack, the police declined to intervene effectively, and victims reported neglect and refusal of assistance by some officers present.*

*On October 10, 2010, the **Belgrade Pride March**, the first since 2001, ended with violent clashes involving thousands of far-right rioters and riot police. Protesters hurled petrol bombs, stones, and firecrackers, injuring over 100 police officers and dozens of civilians, while setting fires to political party headquarters and public property. Despite the violence, the march proceeded briefly under heavy police protection, reflecting both resilience and deep societal polarization. ****
More than a decade later, Serbia's LGBTQ+ community continues to face significant challenges. The landmark EuroPride event planned for Belgrade in 2022 was abruptly cancelled by police citing security concerns amid threats from far-right nationalists, religious groups, and biker gangs who staged counter-protests "for marriage and family." Right-wing parties and movements, such as Dveri, have mobilized to block Pride events and portray the LGBTQ+ movement as a threat to "collective moral values."

Digital spaces have emerged as critical yet contested arenas for gender advocacy. Coordinated disinformation campaigns, online harassment, and attacks via social media disproportionately target organizations and individuals addressing gender and sexuality issues. Reports from North Macedonia's Helsinki Committee[15] and civil society groups in Albania[16] confirm an uptick in such online hostility, creating a chilling effect that discourages public visibility and open discourse.

Integral to this backlash is the **strategic discursive delegitimization of gender and women's rights**, a phenomenon that permeates formal political institutions, mainstream media, and digital mobilization efforts. This delegitimization manifests as a gradual but deliberate erosion of the legitimacy accorded to rights-based frameworks, undermining

[15] Helsinki Committee for Human Rights (2025). The Situation with Hate Speech in North Macedonia in 2024. Retrieved November 12, 2025 from: https://mhc.org.mk/en/reports/the-situation-with-hate-speech-in-north-macedonia-in-2024/

[16] ILGA-Europe and ERA (2025). EU Enlargement Review 2025. Retrieved November 12, 2025 from: https://ilga-europe.org/report/eu-enlargement-review-2025/

progress on critical public agendas such as sexual and reproductive health. At the same time, it restricts civic space by silencing women and gender equality activists through overt threats, persistent violence, and sophisticated legal harassment. These tactics not only weaken the societal acceptance of gender justice but also marginalize the very voices necessary for sustaining and advancing democratic inclusivity.

Further complicating the landscape is the **tactical co-optation of women's empowerment narratives** by political actors. In many cases, these actors promote traditional gender norms while simultaneously harnessing the language of equality to advance limited or symbolic measures, such as gender quotas or the endorsement of women's organizations closely aligned with political interests. This co-optation constrains the emergence of more autonomous and radical feminist mobilization, effectively preserving patriarchal social orders while projecting an image of progressive governance.

Compounding these immediate operational challenges are **legislative and policy developments that erode the normative framework supporting gender equality advocacy**. Gender equality policies face a subtle but consequential dismantling. Rather than being openly revoked, many advancements are systematically weakened through non-transparent means, where the absence of formal decisions masks the gradual extinction of implementation efforts. For instance, North Macedonia's recent amendments removing essential gender-sensitive terms such as "gender identity" and "sexual orientation" from education laws[17] represent an institutional rollback with far-reaching implications. Similar tendencies toward linguistic and policy dilution have been observed elsewhere in the region, such as the temporary suspension of the application of the Gender Equality Law in Serbia[18], underscoring a pattern of symbolic retrenchment and legislative ambiguity that diminishes the legal protections and political legitimacy of gender-focused CSOs. This quiet erosion undermines genuine progress and leaves activists and organizations grappling with façade reforms that fail to deliver substantive change.

Nonetheless, amid these challenges, there are **pockets of legislative and administrative progress** in several countries. Some municipalities in Albania and Kosovo have adopted gender-responsive policies, creating safer operational spaces and enabling more inclusive civic participation. In Serbia, the gradual simplification of registration procedures in urban

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[17] Civilmedia.mk. (2025). Proposed amendments to primary and secondary education laws leave room for discrimination, experts warn. Retrieved October 24, 2025, from https://civilmedia.mk/zakonskite-izmeni-za-osnovno-i-sredno-ostavaat-prostor-za-diskriminatsija-predupreduvaat-ekspertite/

[18] Otvorena Vrata Pravosuđa. (n.d.). Temporary suspension of the application of the Gender Equality Law. Retrieved October 24, 2025, from https://www.otvorenavratapravosudja.rs/teme/ustavno-pravo/privremeno-obustavljena-primena-zakona-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti

centers signals tentative institutional responsiveness. Such developments illustrate the uneven but dynamic nature of legal and institutional evolutions in the region.

The Western Balkans thus present a nuanced and challenging operating context for civil society organizations working on gender equality and women's rights. While the formal legal frameworks and policies provide foundational protections for freedoms of association, assembly, and expression, the practical realization of these rights is frequently undermined by administrative barriers, fluctuating political will, societal resistance, and weak institutional support. These intersecting factors constrain the meaningful and timely participation of gender-focused CSOs in policymaking and public discourse, resulting in an environment where legal safeguards do not consistently translate into effective protections or enabling conditions. Addressing these gaps requires sustained, context-specific strategies to bolster both the legal guarantees and their implementation in practice.

II. Framework for CSO Financial Viability

The financial sustainability of CSOs working on gender equality and women's rights in the Western Balkans remains a critical and persistent challenge, shaped by complex political, social, and economic factors. While the formal legal and fiscal frameworks in these countries generally provide for the registration of non-profits and tax-exempt status, the practical accessibility to stable and adequate funding, especially for gender-focused organizations, varies considerably and is often constrained. **Public funding** is often scarce, inconsistently allocated, and influenced by ideological biases that prioritize more traditional or less politically sensitive initiatives over gender equality and women's rights.

Despite the clear mandates for state support under frameworks like the Istanbul Convention[19], the reality on the ground reveals that access to public funding for gender equality organizations remains constrained by structural barriers and politicized allocation practices. The Istanbul Convention establishes a comprehensive legal and policy framework for addressing gender-based violence and safeguarding victims' rights. It **obliges state parties to implement measures** in four main pillars[20]: **prevention, protection of victims, prosecution of perpetrators, and integrated policies**. Central to the Convention is the **requirement for states to ensure adequate funding for support services, including shelters and SOS helplines, to guarantee accessible and effective assistance for survivors**. However, in practice, the implementation of these financial obligations remains inconsistent across the Western Balkans. While the Convention sets minimum standards for victim protection and service provision, national governments often fall short in allocating sufficient, sustainable resources to civil society organizations responsible for delivering these services. As a result, the majority of the service providing CSOs rely heavily on volunteers and ad hoc external funding, undermining the quality and reach of support available to survivors. The gap between the Convention's ambitious standards and the reality of underfunded service provision highlights a critical challenge for financial sustainability in the sector and underscores the need for more robust, predictable, and transparent funding mechanisms aligned with the Convention's requirements.

According to the EU TACSO 3 Regional Assessment (2024)21, 60 percent of CSOs working on gender equality and LGBTIQ rights reported unsuccessful applications for public funding. When compared to 74 percent among other CSOs, this finding suggests at

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[19] Council of Europe. (n.d.). Gender equality and the Istanbul Convention: a decade of action. Retrieved from https://rm.coe.int/final-prems-rapport-de-berlin-may-2021/1680a3d7fd.

[20] Council of Europe. (n.d.). Key facts about the Istanbul Convention. Retrieved from https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/key-facts

[21] EU TACSO 3 (2025). DG ENEST Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region: 2024 Assessment. Retrieved November 3, 2025 from: https://www.tacso.eu/events/launch-of-the-3rd-assessment-report/

first glance that they are not disproportionately disadvantaged in public funding competitions. However, such interpretations overlook the structural barriers and self-exclusion stemming from politicized and non-transparent allocation practices. In practice, many feminist and LGBTIQ+ organizations refrain from applying due to perceived bias, while a significant share of "gender-labelled" funds is channeled to government-affiliated or conservative groups rather than independent rights-based actors. National reports, for example, highlight that in North Macedonia and Serbia, government funding for gender equality CSOs constitutes only a marginal fraction of the overall state support for the civil sector, with some authorities favoring religiously affiliated or conservative groups.

Moreover, **international donor funding**, which historically constituted a significant portion of financial support for gender-focused civil society, has declined in volume and shifted toward short-term, competitive grants and project-based funding.[22] In Montenegro, for example, gender organizations have reported funding reductions of up to 40 percent, significantly threatening their operational sustainability and community responsiveness. This increasingly fragmented and unpredictable donor landscape creates heightened vulnerability for smaller grassroots organizations, challenging their capacity to plan sustainable programming and retain skilled personnel over the long term. A persistent challenge in the region is the gap between the allocation of international and EU funding for gender equality and its actual impact on addressing structural inequalities. While significant resources are channeled toward initiatives labeled as gender-focused, these projects often remain disconnected from the lived realities of marginalized groups, failing to translate into tangible improvements in gender equality or social protection. This disconnect not only undermines the credibility of advocacy efforts but also weakens local ownership and limits the transformative potential of donor support. Furthermore, critical gaps in service provision remain unaddressed, such as the absence of dedicated shelters for LGBTI individuals in Kosovo. This lack of targeted infrastructure highlights the need for more inclusive and responsive funding mechanisms that reflect the diverse needs of vulnerable communities and strengthen advocacy for specialized support services.

Moreover, competition for donor funding is intense, with frequent shifts in priorities pushing organizations toward short-term projects at the expense of strategic, long-term engagement. Ideological gatekeeping and scrutiny of gender initiatives further restrict resource access compared to other CSO sectors. Internally, gender CSOs experience greater fragmentation and power asymmetries. Resource scarcity and thematic sensitivity foster competition, reducing opportunities for coalitions or collective strength and further constraining their influence within civil society. This internal division weakens civil

[22] BCSDN (2025). Donor Support, Civic Space, and the Future of Civil Society in the Western Balkans. Retrieved November 10, 2025 from: https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/110-3-BCSDN-Research-on-Shifting-Donors-Policies_compressed.pdf

society's collective voice and reduces resilience against external pressures, including co-optation and backlash.

Fundraising from the private sector and local philanthropy remains a challenge for the wider civil society – and that is even more true for the gender-rights organizations – largely due to persistent societal conservatism around gender issues and a limited cultural understanding of the strategic value of investing in gender justice. Many businesses and philanthropic actors are reluctant to associate with organizations advocating for women's rights, reproductive health, or LGBTIQ+ inclusion, fearing reputational risks or backlash within socially conservative environments. This implicit gatekeeping manifests as a form of informal discrimination, where gender CSOs are excluded from potential partnerships or sponsorship opportunities.

CSOs in Albania have highlighted a significant **challenge in accessing diversified funding sources**. Corporate actors often prefer to support less contentious initiatives, such as youth sports or cultural events, rather than advocacy connected to gender equality. However, this issue is not unique to Albania; similar patterns of informal exclusion and gatekeeping exist throughout the Western Balkans. Such barriers restrict the diversification of income and intensify dependence on dwindling international aid, limiting the long-term sustainability of gender-focused organizations.

Civil society actors further report that these financial constraints commonly compel organizations to engage in **self-censorship or depoliticization strategies to secure funding**. To align with donor or governmental expectations, many CSOs dilute their transformative messaging or avoid addressing more contentious structural issues such as patriarchy, gender-based violence, or discriminatory legislation. This limits their ability to pursue ambitious advocacy agendas and reduce systemic gender inequalities.

The **uneven distribution of financial resources** also exacerbates regional disparities in civil society development: well-established organizations based in urban centers, particularly capitals with stronger international donor presence and networks, are better positioned to mobilize funding and maintain stability. Additionally, CSOs engaged in gender issues dedicate most of their capacity to day-to-day activities, leaving limited resources for volunteer mentoring and capacity-building, with volunteers often lacking support and guidance, diminishing their effectiveness. On the other hand, CSOs operating in rural or marginalized areas, or those led by grassroots activists without high-profile affiliations, frequently struggle to access any consistent financial support, hindering their growth and impact. For example, feminist groups in remote areas of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to struggle with accessing funding, as donor opportunities are largely centralized in urban hubs such as Prishtina, and many of these organizations face capacity constraints that make it difficult to meet donor requirements, thereby limiting their ability to reach vulnerable communities.

Despite these obstacles, some gender equality CSOs have demonstrated **innovation and resilience** by cultivating collaborative coalitions, engaging in regional networking, and leveraging digital platforms for crowdfunding, advocacy campaigns, and awareness raising. International programs supported by the European Union and Kvinna till Kvinna have provided vital capacity-building assistance and financial injections, although typically within limited project cycles rather than sustainable core funding.

In sum, financial sustainability constitutes a persistent challenge for CSOs focused on gender equality across the region. International donor funding has diminished or shifted toward mainstreaming gender within broader programming rather than maintaining targeted support for women's rights organizations. Public funding by local governments is frequently symbolic, politically influenced, inconsistent, and lacking in transparency, factors disproportionately affecting small-scale and rural organizations. Many women-led groups operate on modest budgets, often below €40,000 annually, undermining their capacity for sustained advocacy and service delivery. Disparities in access to donor funds and governmental support between urban and rural civil society actors further accentuate regional inequities.

The financial viability is directly undermined by constrained public resources, shifting and fragmented donor priorities, limited private sector involvement, and sociopolitical stigmatization linked to the sensitive nature of their work. Strengthening the sustainability of these organizations requires comprehensive strategies that increase predictable public and local funding allocations, incentivize private sector engagement through awareness and partnership development, and foster donor approaches that value long-term, flexible funding aligned with feminist agendas. Enhancing financial resilience is essential to empower gender equality CSOs to sustain broad-reaching programs, strengthen advocacy for transformative policies, and foster inclusive societies across the entire region.

III. State–CSO Cooperation

Cooperation between state institutions and CSOs working on gender equality in the Western Balkans is shaped by a combination of formalized frameworks and weak practical implementation. Most countries have established national gender equality mechanisms—such as councils, committees, or intersectoral working groups—that in principle enable CSO participation in policy design, implementation, and monitoring. However, these mechanisms often function as **procedural rather than transformative instruments**, characterized by bureaucratic consultation and inconsistent follow-through on civil society recommendations. While legal and institutional structures exist, their use is frequently limited to fulfilling donor or EU reporting requirements rather than fostering genuine co-creation or shared decision-making.

Across the region, **consultation processes remain predominantly symbolic**. CSOs are often invited to participate in working groups or advisory bodies, but their input rarely shapes policy outcomes or budgetary priorities. In several cases—such as Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia—civil society participation is viewed as a box-ticking exercise, designed to demonstrate formal inclusiveness while substantive influence remains absent. This dynamic contributes to a pattern of **conditional participation**, where state engagement with gender equality organizations is tolerated only when it aligns with government narratives or short-term project cycles. The result is a civic environment where cooperation exists on paper but lacks depth, continuity, and accountability.

Municipal-level cooperation presents a more nuanced picture. While examples of constructive collaboration can be found—such as in select municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and North Macedonia—these remain isolated and dependent on individual political will or donor-supported initiatives. Local governments that engage effectively with gender CSOs demonstrate the potential of decentralized policymaking to promote participatory governance, but the absence of institutionalized models prevents these practices from scaling nationally. Many municipalities still lack the financial and human resources to sustain partnerships, relying instead on ad hoc engagement driven by external funding opportunities.

Across the region, funding arrangements for cooperation efforts are generally fragile. While some state institutions allocate budgets for small grants or joint projects with CSOs, most gender-focused organizations rely heavily on international donor funding to sustain their work, including participation in official consultation mechanisms. This **dependency on external resources** limits long-term sustainability and constrains state-CSO relations to episodic and project-based collaborations.

A further layer of constraint stems from the **politicization of gender equality and the persistence of patriarchal resistance within public institutions**. Gender-focused

organizations across the region report facing stigmatization, defamation, and delegitimization, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTIQ equality, or gender-based violence. The backlash is not limited to societal actors but is often echoed by political representatives, reflecting enduring institutional prejudices. As seen in Montenegro and Serbia, women activists are personally targeted with hostile narratives accusing them of undermining family values or advancing "foreign agendas," reinforcing the risks of visibility for feminist leadership in public life.

A **growing anti-gender climate is increasingly evident in the public discourse and institutions**. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, extremist "pro-life" groups have become more visible, often staging demonstrations in front of gynecological clinics and spreading hate speech. These groups actively disseminate fear and misinformation, seeking to undermine public trust in reproductive health services and restrict access to essential care. Their actions, sometimes supported by **local authority figures and powerful religious institutions**, challenge legal rights such as access to abortion and contribute to a climate of intimidation and exclusion for women and gender equality advocates. The presence of such groups, coupled with **official tolerance or endorsement**, underscores the deepening resistance to progressive gender norms and the institutionalization of anti-gender rhetoric in both public and policy spaces.

Despite these challenges, **examples of constructive engagement and localized progress** do exist. In several countries, CSOs have contributed to developing gender action plans, improving domestic violence prevention frameworks, and integrating gender perspectives into local governance. However, these gains remain fragile without sustained political will, transparent public funding, and recognition of gender CSOs as equal partners in policymaking. The overarching pattern across the Western Balkans is one of **institutional formalism combined with substantive exclusion**—where the architecture for dialogue is in place, but the political and administrative culture necessary for genuine partnership is still largely absent.

In sum, state–CSO cooperation on gender equality and women's rights in the Western Balkans is institutionalized in principle, with formal mechanisms existing across all countries studied. Nevertheless, in practice, these relationships are frequently characterized by irregularity, symbolic engagement, variable influence of CSO input, and constrained resource support. The extent to which state authorities genuinely share power with civil society actors or integrate their perspectives into policymaking and implementation remains limited, reflecting a broader need for strengthening both the quality and depth of partnership.

Gender-Specific Dynamics and Emerging Patterns of the CSO Enabling Environment

Civil society organizations engaged in gender equality, women's rights, and related fields in the region face an enabling environment that diverges sharply from that experienced by CSOs operating in other sectors. While the **concept of an "enabling environment"** for civil society is often **framed in legalistic and procedural terms**, covering freedoms of association, expression, and assembly, alongside supportive administrative frameworks, the **reality reveals a stark contrast** between the formal environment and the lived experience of gender equality CSOs, activists, female leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders working on sensitive issues of sexuality, gender, and women's rights. Beneath these patterns of backlash, anti-gender actors, and shrinking space sit the region's broader patriarchal configuration of power, which fundamentally shapes institutions, public discourse, resource flows, and the safety of those working within this space. CSOs working in gender related issues, are not only navigating procedural obstacles and episodic hostility but are also operating within and often against, an entrenched system that sustains gender inequalities across societal and institutional levels. Having this earlier in mind, helps provide a clearer **conceptual anchor** for why their **enabling environment differs** so markedly from that of other CSOs and contextualizes the rest of the analysis.

On paper, these guarantees are nominally uniform and apply equally to all civil society actors. However, gender equality organizations operate in an environment that is not merely "less enabling"; it is actively hostile, structurally constraining, and at times dangerously repressive. When viewed through the lens of gendered power relations and sociopolitical contestation, the enabling environment prescribed by laws and policies masks a far harsher, deeply patriarchal reality that systematically restricts the full exercise of civil society freedoms by those challenging entrenched norms.

One of the most acute and pervasive challenges concerns the **security of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and activists**. Across the region, WHRDs, alongside CSOs and independent media outlets, confront escalating intimidation, threats, smear campaigns, and both digital and physical attacks[23]. These hostile actions, frequently originating from organized "anti-gender" or "anti-rights" groups opposed to what they term "gender ideology," have significantly eroded the safety and operational space for gender equality advocacy. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation's 2023 report on WHRDs in the Western

[23] Vreme. (2025, August 18). Rally in support of Nikolina Sinđelić: "Who protects us from the police". Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://vreme.com/en/vesti/skup-podrske-nikolini-sindjelic-ko-nas-stiti-od-policije/

Balkans found that over half of the interviewed activists perceived these anti-gender forces as the main perpetrators behind such attacks. For example, the Gender Centre of the Republic of Srpska (BiH) has endured repeated harassment and targeted violence linked to these groups[24].

A persistent and deeply concerning pattern across the Western Balkans is the **weaponization of women's sexuality[25] as a tool of public smear and intimidation** against gender equality activists and human rights defenders. Fabricated sexualized content and malicious disinformation campaigns aim not only to discredit individual advocates but also to enforce social exclusion and silence dissent. These attacks, often entirely baseless, exploit entrenched patriarchal norms that stigmatize women's bodies and policing of female behavior, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. Beyond the immediate damage to reputation, the psychological toll on targeted women is profound, contributing to anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges.

Nikolina Sinđelić, a student and young activist from Serbia, was subjected to severe police violence during a protest in Belgrade in 2025. Detained with other protesters, she was physically assaulted, including being slapped and having her head slammed against a wall by a special police unit commander. She was also threatened with rape – an attempt to intimidate and silence her activism. After release, Sinđelić required medical treatment for her injuries. Shortly thereafter, intimate photographs of her were shared online without her consent, amplifying the psychological harm and public stigmatization she faced.

Vanja Calović, Executive Director of Montenegro's anti-corruption watchdog MANS, endured a relentless smear campaign after exposing electoral fraud and government corruption. Pro-government tabloid Informer published fabricated pornographic images falsely attributed to her, aiming to destroy her credibility and silence her activism. This campaign, widely condemned by international and regional human rights organizations, typifies the severe gender-based digital violence faced by women human rights defenders in the region. Montenegrin authorities have been slow to respond, underscoring systemic weaknesses.

[24] Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. (2024). Women's Rights in Western Balkans 2024. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/womens-rights-in-western-balkans-2024/

[25] Balkan Insight. (2025, August 28). In Serbia, women's sexuality is being weaponised to silence dissent. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://balkaninsight.com/2025/08/28/in-serbia-womens-sexuality-is-being-weaponised-to-silence-dissent/

Activists consistently report a **growing sense of insecurity**, describing their environment as being "attacked from every side." Verbal abuses, physical intimidation, and online harassment combine to create a climate that threatens both personal safety and the capacity for public engagement. Women activists, women leaders[26], and journalists[27] covering gender and human rights issues disproportionately bear these burdens, facing more frequent and severe forms of harassment than many other civil society actors[28]. This hostility is not only a reaction to what activists say or do but is also triggered by their very presence and visibility in public life, which challenges deeply rooted patriarchal norms and male-dominated cultural structures. As one respondent in Kosovo observed, "activists get targeted, not CSOs," underscoring how gendered power relations personalize risk and make women's participation in civic space itself a form of resistance.

In North Macedonia, gender equality initiatives and experts face intense scrutiny and backlash from conservative groups. Irena Cvetkovic, a prominent gender equality researcher and human rights defender, has been repeatedly targeted during public debates, facing over a dozen direct attacks by opponents of gender-sensitive education and LGBTIQ+ rights. This campaign coincides with heated controversies around sexual education reforms and the role of NGOs such as Margini and HERA, which have been accused by conservative coalitions of promoting a foreign "gender ideology." Religious leaders have publicly challenged these initiatives, framing the debates as protection of traditional values, while reflecting broader societal polarization.

Compounding these direct threats is the **proliferation of strategic lawsuits against public participation** (SLAPP lawsuits). During 2023 alone, 53 such legal actions were reported across the six Western Balkan countries[29]. These lawsuits target human rights defenders, activists, media outlets, and organizations, with the explicit intent to intimidate, censor, and silence work on gender and other contested rights issues. SLAPP processes are typically protracted, costly, and exhausting, draining organizational capacity and diverting resources away from advocacy and service provision.

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[26] Strumica Denes. (n.d.). Censorship, intimidation, and a fascist-like campaign against 90% of the population in Macedonia by those claiming they cared for our children. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://strumicadenes.mk/opstini/strumica/tsenzura-zaplashuvana-i-fashizoidna-hajka-protiv-90-od-naselenieto-vo-makedonija-od-strana-na-onie-koi-tvrdat-deka-mnogu-se-grizhele-za-nashite-detsa/

[27] Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa. (2025, May 22). "They failed to silence us": The harsh reality of investigative female journalists in the Balkans. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/They-failed-to-silence-us-the-harsh-reality-of-investigative-female-journalists-in-the-Balkans-238020

[28] Faktor.mk. (n.d.). Bishop of Stobi Gjakov: I am ready to be tried because I spoke the truth. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://faktor.mk/episkop-stobiski-gjakov-podgotven-sum-da-bidam-suden-oti-ja-govorev-vistinata

[29] Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN). (2024). From silence to strength: BCSDN's report on SLAPPs in the Western Balkans. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://balkancsd.net/from-silence-to-strength-bcsdns-report-on-slapps-in-the-western-balkans-is-out-now/

The fragile status of WHRDs reflects **structural weaknesses in national legal frameworks concerning the protection of human rights defenders**. While the countries of the region are signatories to international human rights treaties guaranteeing the safety and rights of HRDs, implementation remains sporadic and ineffective. Prevention, protection, and prosecution mechanisms addressing violations are often weakly enforced, generalized, or ill-suited to the specific vulnerabilities of gender activists[30]. This precarious security environment mirrors a broader pattern of democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space within the region.

During Pride Week in June 2013, the LGBTI Support Centre in Skopje was violently attacked by a crowd of over 30 people while around 40 activists were inside. The attackers hurled stones, bottles, bricks, and Molotov cocktails at the premises, causing injuries and damage. The arson attempt was especially alarming, involving petrol poured on the roof beams and deliberate attempts to set the building on fire. Despite the clear danger to those inside, the attack was met with inadequate official response, and no perpetrators were immediately held accountable.

All Western Balkan countries continue to be classified as hybrid or transitional regimes with fragile democratic institutions, limited civil liberties, and constrained political rights. The erosion of democratic protections[31] disproportionately impacts those advocating for gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights[32], and women's empowerment. The narrowing space for dissenting voices not only curtails advocacy but also reinforces patriarchal and authoritarian social orders.

Organizations advocating for women and gender-based violence prevention are often portrayed as "destroyers of the family," accused of encouraging women to abandon traditional roles—a narrative frequently reinforced by politicized rhetoric, such as a court lawyer's unfounded personal attack on a gender NGO representative during a trial. This vilification is complemented by a broader disinformation campaign, labeling these groups as "foreign mercenaries" or carriers of dangerous ideologies, de-legitimizing their work and marginalizing their voices in public debate.

Co-optation emerges as a recurrent tactic deployed by governments and political elites, subverting the potential of gender CSOs and activists to serve as independent watchdogs

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[30] Balkan Insight. (2013, June 24). Skopje anti-gay attacks condemned. Balkan Insight. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://balkaninsight.com/2013/06/24/skopje-anti-gay-attacks-condemned/

[31] Eror, A. (2022, September 14). 'It's a win for us': Serbia's cancelled EuroPride exposes ongoing LGBTQ+ struggle. *The Guardian*. Retrieved September 4, 2025, from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/14/belgrade-serbia-cancelled-europride-exposes-ongoing-lgbtq-struggles

[32] Apuzzo, M. (2010, October 10). Serbia police clash with far-right rioters at gay pride march. *The Guardian*. Retrieved September 4, 2025, from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/10/serbia-police-rioters-gay-pride

or transformative agents. Formal consultative forums and multi-stakeholder spaces, introduced ostensibly to promote inclusion, often function as mechanisms of conditional acceptance, where engagement is permitted only so long as activism remains circumscribed within narrow bounds favorable to political elites. This transactional arrangement diminishes the critical role of feminist civil society in holding power to account, forcing organizations into self-censorship or dilution of advocacy agendas.

This dynamic aligns with **broader socioeconomic and cultural backlash, which amplifies hostility** toward gender equality agendas and those who champion them. The repeated incidents of harassment, intimidation, and targeted violence against gender CSOs and activists, both in public and digital spaces, are not aberrations; they are embedded expressions of societal resistance sustained by conservative religious, nationalist, and patriarchal interests. These forces mobilize to police public discourse and delegitimize feminist voices, framing gender justice as external or corrosive to national identity and "traditional values." Crucially, this backlash is tolerated, if not tacitly encouraged, by institutions that should safeguard civic freedoms. Law enforcement inconsistencies and limited protective mechanisms expose women activists, journalists, and LGBTIQ+ advocates to disproportionate risks, fostering a climate of fear that chills public engagement and narrows civic space in practice.

A particularly troubling and complex manifestation of this backlash has become more visible among youth, where an observable trend sees young men increasingly embracing **conservative, anti-feminist role models**. These figures, amplified and disseminated through global digital platforms, promote rigid, conservative masculinity norms conflated with skepticism or outright rejection of feminist principles and gender equality efforts. The allure of such role models among impressionable youth is tied to feelings of disenfranchisement, identity crisis, and resistance to social change perceived as threatening traditional gender hierarchies. This phenomenon not only reflects but reinforces a broader sociocultural retrenchment that deepens the polarization of gender discourse in society and solidifies patriarchal power structures that impede progressive transformation.

An interviewee described encountering young men in their early twenties who feel that gender equality efforts are "taking away men's rights," leading to a sense of losing traditional authority and economic opportunities. This sentiment is often expressed using jargon and narratives borrowed from online influencers like Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson. These young men, feeling disempowered, are forming fragmented online communities primarily through social media, where they share views opposing feminist movements and prepare for more organized resistance. While mostly confined to digital spaces for now, this emerging network signals a growing polarized backlash that gender equality advocates must contend with in their work.

Although this trend has been particularly noted during the research in Kosovo, similar patterns are evident across the region. UN Women warned that online "manosphere" communities, and the influencers who shape them, are rapidly gaining traction among young men worldwide[33]. These digital spaces normalize misogynistic narratives, undermine gender-equality efforts, and contribute to a broader international backlash against feminist progress. The rise of these communities is particularly pronounced as women increasingly assert their presence in public spaces, challenging traditional gender hierarchies and triggering resistance from male-dominated cultures. This dynamic further complicates the safe operation of women's and gender-equality CSOs, as the backlash is often intensified by the visibility and activism of women in public life.

Beyond security concerns, gender-focused CSOs also face persistent **social and political delegitimization**[34]. Their causes are frequently stigmatized as foreign-funded or culturally alien, contrasting with generally more accepted sectors such as environmental protection or social welfare. This delegitimization affects both public perception and political spaces, undermining the credibility and influence of gender CSOs in ways not commonly encountered by other civil society groups.

At the intersection of these pressures lies the **persistent marginalization** of those embodying multiple vulnerabilities, ethnic minorities, rural activists, LGBTIQ+ persons, underscoring how the enabling environment's failures compound based on intersecting identities. Youth activists, while injecting fresh energy and innovation into gender activism, face heightened precarity with limited institutional protection.

A critical factor underpinning the constrained enabling environment is the pervasive lack of genuine understanding and appreciation of the gender dimension within public policies and institutional frameworks. Despite formal commitments to gender equality and mainstreaming, many state actors exhibit only a superficial grasp of the concept and its transformative potential. This gap leads to pro-forma compliance rather than meaningful integration of gender perspectives into policymaking, budgeting, and program implementation. The absence of long-term vision regarding the benefits of gender-responsive governance perpetuates tokenistic measures, ineffective resource allocation, and weak institutional accountability. As a result, gender equality initiatives often remain marginalized or instrumentalized within broader political agendas, reinforcing the very

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[33] UN Women. (2025, June). Online "manosphere" communities fuel backlash against gender equality. Retrieved from https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164531

[34] 'Kamo Šutra?' filing a lawsuit against Democrats: They made false accusations, CdM Montenegro, February 17, 2025, https://www.cdm.me/english/kamo-sutra-filing-a-lawsuit-against-democrats-they-made-false-accusations/

inequalities they seek to address and undermining the capacity of civil society organizations to engage as equal partners in democratic governance.

Taken together, these gender-specific dynamics, heightened security risks and harassment, legal intimidation, delegitimization, conditional state relations, constrained funding, internal fragmentation, digital backlash, and intersectional exclusion, create an enabling environment substantively more restrictive and contested than that experienced by many other civil society sectors in the Western Balkans. The trajectory faced by these gender CSOs and activists is emblematic of a broader democratic deficit, where substantive participation of marginalized civil society actors is neither fully protected nor genuinely valued. Recognition of these unique realities is critical for developing focused monitoring, protection, and advocacy strategies that enhance the resilience, effectiveness, and sustainability of gender equality movements across the region.

Ultimately, the persistent limitations of the enabling environment for gender equality advocacy in the Western Balkans expose a fundamental challenge: the disconnect between formal policy commitments and the genuine capacity and political will for transformative change. Without comprehensive education and deepening understanding of gender mainstreaming within public institutions, accompanied by sustained political resolve, gender equality remains a peripheral concern often reduced to symbolic gestures. Meaningful progress requires bridging this gap by fostering institutional accountability, promoting cross-sectoral collaboration, and embedding gender perspectives authentically into all facets of governance and service delivery.

These dynamics manifest differently across the Western Balkan countries, reflecting varying degrees of institutional openness, political resistance, and social backlash, as summarized in the comparative overview below.

Table 1 Country-Specific Overview of the Enabling Environment for Gender CSOs.

Country	Current Environment and Key Challenges	Priority Needs and Recommendations
Albania	Despite a generally protective legal framework, gender CSOs face exclusion, harassment, and unstable funding. Public resources are limited, unpredictable, and donor-dependent, while institutional openness to gender diversity remains inconsistent. Local gender action plans show positive practice, but overall engagement is fragmented.	Enforce rights protections, address gender-based hate speech, ensure transparent, gender-aligned funding, and strengthen participatory consultation mechanisms.

Bosnia and Herzegovina	Fragmented legal and institutional frameworks, entrenched anti-gender narratives, and co-optation risks define the environment. Patriarchal norms, political resistance, and weak media and education systems hinder inclusive policymaking and advocacy.	Enforce gender laws, strengthen grassroots organizational capacity, counter backlash through strategic communication, and expand civic education promoting equality.
Kosovo	There is broad associational freedom, but gender and LGBTI CSOs face society-driven silencing, media antagonism and chilled expression through ridicule, vilification, online threats or SLAPPs. State funding remains short-term and low-value, sustaining precarity. State-CSO cooperation is uneven and largely procedural. CSO service providers carry state duties on fragile arrangements.	Strengthen protections against gendered online harassment and SLAPPS, introduce predictable-multi-year, core funding for women, LGBTI+ and minority-led CSOs, ensure early and meaningful consultation, and secure CSO-run essential services through stable multi-year public contracts.
Montenegro	Gender CSOs participate in formal consultation mechanisms, including national teams addressing violence and trafficking, but engagement remains largely procedural. Activists face stigmatization, defamation, and public discrediting. Cooperation at municipal level is limited, political will remains weak.	Institutionalize transparent state–CSO dialogue, ensure meaningful participation in policy development, increase sustainable funding for gender and LGBTIQ+ CSOs, and implement protection measures against harassment.
North Macedonia	Despite legal guarantees, gender CSOs face bureaucratic delays, administrative burdens, and political interference. The rollback of gender terms in legislation signals conservative regression, fostering self-censorship and risk among activists. Institutional cooperation is inconsistent and underfunded.	Secure multi-year funding, reinforce legal protections, and formalize mechanisms for structured CSO participation in policymaking.
Serbia	Civic space continues to contract, marked by repression, smear campaigns, and violence against women and queer activists. Gender equality is politically instrumentalized, and formal protections remain ineffective. The withdrawal of international donors further endangers smaller organizations' sustainability.	Strengthen protection mechanisms, ensure gender-sensitive justice processes, and establish transparent, long-term funding models that safeguard organizational independence.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The enabling environment for gender focused CSOs in the Western Balkans remains defined by contradiction: **progressive legal frameworks coexist with persistent structural, political, and societal constraints that obstruct their realization in practice**. While all six countries have adopted constitutional and legislative guarantees protecting fundamental freedoms and gender equality, these commitments are often undermined by weak enforcement, selective implementation, and a pervasive lack of political will.

Across the region, gender equality organizations operate in a context shaped by entrenched patriarchal power structures and growing anti-gender mobilization. What began as sporadic backlash has evolved into coordinated movements drawing on religious, nationalist, and global conservative networks. These forces systematically attack feminist and LGBTIQ+ groups, often using smear campaigns, disinformation, and sexualized harassment to silence dissent. Strategic lawsuits, online vilification, and physical intimidation have become normalized, turning civic participation into a high-risk activity, particularly for women HRDs.

State–civil society relations have become increasingly conditional and performative. Formal consultative bodies and policy dialogues frequently serve to demonstrate compliance with donor expectations rather than to enable genuine power-sharing. Governments tolerate gender CSOs insofar as their work remains depoliticized and service-oriented, while advocacy that challenges institutional or cultural hierarchies is marginalized or branded as foreign-driven. This dynamic blurs the line between inclusion and co-optation, reinforcing a civic space where participation is permitted but influence remains constrained.

Despite these constraints, gender-focused CSOs remain among the most resilient advocates for democratic accountability and social justice. Their work often bridges service delivery, advocacy, and public awareness, sustaining essential support for victims of violence, marginalized communities, and young activists. However, their operational space is weakened by unstable financial frameworks, shrinking donor support, and the absence of institutionalized state partnerships. Local governments that engage constructively with civil society demonstrate the potential for participatory governance, yet such examples remain exceptions amid a regional pattern of superficial consultation and policy co-optation.

The findings reaffirm a core tension between form and substance: while gender equality is embedded in official policies and EU accession frameworks, implementation is hindered by patriarchal norms, administrative arbitrariness, and political resistance. Without genuine integration of gender perspectives into governance structures, civic participation

will remain procedural rather than transformative. To secure a truly enabling environment for gender CSOs, governments, donors, and regional actors must address the intersecting political, financial, and cultural barriers that curtail their autonomy and influence. A gender-responsive civic space is not an isolated objective – it is a precondition for democratic resilience, accountability, and inclusive social transformation.

To translate these findings into practice, a set of coordinated actions is required to strengthen the protection, participation, and sustainability of gender-focused civil society across the region.

1. **Safeguarding Civic Space**

Recognize and vigorously respond to the ongoing erosion of civic space affecting gender-focused CSOs through restrictive funding practices, politicized regulations, and legislative obstacles. Pressure governments to uphold fundamental rights through coordinated regional and international advocacy. Support organizations under acute threat, ensuring their operational continuity through emergency support mechanisms. Protecting and expanding civic space requires strengthening alliances between gender CSOs and other democratic actors to foster resilience against repression and enhance collective influence.

2. **Tailored, Country-Specific Approaches**

Develop and implement strategies that deeply reflect the distinct political, cultural, and institutional landscapes of each country. One-size-fits-all solutions are insufficient to address the complex realities faced by gender equality CSOs, particularly where civic space is rapidly shrinking, and institutional hostility is entrenched. Tailored approaches must integrate local knowledge, leverage existing community networks, and be adaptable to evolving conditions to safeguard civil society's capacity to influence policy and advance gender justice effectively.

3. **Institutional Recognition and Systematic Involvement**

Governments and international partners should formally recognize CSOs specializing in gender equality as indispensable partners in policy-making processes. Their involvement must go beyond formal consultation, ensuring active participation in drafting, monitoring, and evaluating sectoral policies based on their proven track records and expertise.

4. **Counteracting Anti-Gender Movements and Disinformation**

Coordinated strategies are vital to counteract anti-gender movements that spread misinformation and hostility towards gender equality initiatives. This requires public awareness campaigns, legal advocacy, and collaboration with independent media to promote inclusive and evidence-based narratives. Monitoring and exposing disinformation campaigns will help safeguard public discourse and protect gender-focused civil society actors from smear tactics and backlash.

5. Addressing Patriarchal Barriers

Prioritize interventions that confront the deeply rooted patriarchal norms operating beneath formal legal and policy frameworks. Such norms systematically undermine government commitments and obstruct the full realization of gender equality. Efforts should include comprehensive gender-sensitivity training across all levels of public institutions, sustained public education campaigns to dismantle harmful stereotypes, and proactive support for grassroots movements challenging traditional power hierarchies.

6. Legal and Political Safeguards for CSO Autonomy

Establish robust legal and political protections that guarantee the autonomy of gender-focused CSOs. These frameworks must protect their rights to free association, expression, and operation free from political interference. Ensuring transparent and objective oversight mechanisms should strengthen accountability but never undermine the independence or mission of these organizations.

7. Embedding Gender Mainstreaming in EU Integration Processes

Gender perspectives must be systematically integrated across all policy sectors and EU accession-related reforms via comprehensive gender mainstreaming strategies. Governments should employ gender-disaggregated data and impact assessments, engaging gender-specialized CSOs actively in policy monitoring and evaluation. This approach will improve policy effectiveness and advance inclusive democratic governance.

8. Sustainable and Transparent Funding

Public and donor funding mechanisms should support long-term financial sustainability of gender equality CSOs, with multi-year grants and reduced administrative burdens. Funding allocation should prioritize organizations demonstrating credibility, sustainability, and impactful results. Prioritizing women-led and marginalized group organizations will foster sectoral resilience and inclusivity, enabling capacity building and effective advocacy.

9. Capacity Building and Digital Safety

Enhance capacity-building programs focused on strengthening the operational resilience of gender-focused CSOs. This includes training on digital security, advocacy strategies, organizational development, and responding to harassment or misinformation. Encouraging regional cooperation and networking will amplify their collective influence and solidarity.